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VADE MECUM, VOLVENTIBUS ANNIS

THE MAYANS
SAN ANTONIO,
TEXAS

Degree 10

Number 307

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Spiritual Progress Through Prayer

A SERIES OF EIGHT MASTERFUL LESSONS
FOR YOUR GROWTH THROUGH EFFECTIVE PRAYER



LESSON FIVE

Mayan Revelation Number 307

Finding Forgiveness Through Prayer

IN THIS LESSON:

SEPARATE RIGHT FROM WRONG

HOW TO ASK FOR FORGIVENESS

LEARN THE VALUE OF PENITENCE

ACCEPT GOD'S PARDON

BELOVED PERFECTOR:

THIS Lesson on FINDING FORGIVENESS is the fifth in your Series on "SPIRITUAL PROGRESS THROUGH PRAYER". I trust that during the past weeks you have discovered ways by which you can claim power to overcome your daily problems, and that by meeting God regularly you have experienced a closer and more personal fellowship with your Maker.

Sometimes, no doubt, you have known disappointments. Mastery of the techniques of prayer requires years of faithful study and practice. New insights sometimes flash into one's consciousness; more often they come slowly. Spiritual progress is made as one hurdle after another is surmounted. Many obstacles are formed by errors and shortcomings.

Every earnest seeker for Truth recognizes that any failure of his to respond to noble impulses constitutes a stumbling block on his climb to God. We long to do what is right, but frequently we yield to the temptation to be self-indulgent. We believe the Ten Commandments were given for our good, but sometimes we violate moral laws. We become separated from God when we fail to love Him with all our hearts, and minds, and souls. We create a gulf that isolates us from our fellowmen whenever we are little concerned about their welfare.

God made man "in His own image" to personify His own nature. Whenever a man or woman falls short of this ideal, he feels a sense of defeat. This leaves him frustrated and unhappy. It makes him an easy victim of doubts and fears. It may prompt him to seek escape by engaging in a feverish round of activity, or by indulging in stimulants and sedatives. Personal failures foster thoughts and acts that are the seedbeds of psychosomatic illness unless a man asks for forgiveness and experiences the cleansing which God alone can give.

As you approach this Lesson, remember that the word "sin" refers not only to gross transgressions, but to any failure to let our lives be controlled by God-like impulses. The refusal to respond to the divine call to be generous and kind can lead to spiritual isolation just as surely as stealing can make a boy want to run and hide. Failure to love the child next door and to be concerned for his welfare, can make it impossible for a man or woman to realize God's Presence.

We all have fallen short of our ideals. We need to ask forgiveness for those things we have done which are unworthy of a child of God; and we need to ask forgiveness for the impulses to be generous and helpful which entered our minds, but then were pushed aside and amounted to nothing. A prayer of Alcuin, which has been in use since the eighth century, expresses the attitude of penitence. It is an attitude we all need to acquire. Make it your own as you approach this Lesson on FORGIVENESS.

Join with me now as we begin the fifth Lesson in our Series, as we speak aloud the words of this prayer:

PRAYER

"Almighty and merciful God, the Fountain of all goodness, who knowest the thoughts of our hearts, we confess unto Thee that we have sinned against Thee, and done evil in Thy sight. Wash us, we beseech Thee, from the stains of our past sins, and give us grace and power to put away all hurtful things; so that, being delivered from the bondage of sin, we may bring forth worthy fruits of repentance.

"O eternal Light, shine into our hearts. O eternal Goodness, deliver us from evil. O eternal Power, be Thou our support. Eternal Wisdom, scatter the darkness of our ignorance. Eternal Pity, have mercy upon us. Grant unto us that with all our hearts, and minds, and strength, we may evermore seek Thy face; and finally bring us, in Thine infinite mercy, to Thy holy presence. So strengthen our weakness that, following in the footsteps of Thy blessed Son, we may obtain Thy mercy, and enter into Thy promised joy. Amen."

SEPARATE RIGHT FROM WRONG

GOD has prepared for each of us a life that is rich, and full, and satisfying. But He has not made us puppets. He does not pull the strings of desire so we will always choose what is best. Our Creator has given to each child of His the right of free choice. It is up to us to separate the right from the wrong, - to decide between the good and the best.

No doubt it will be far easier for you, Beloved Perfector, to push aside any temptation to dishonesty, or immorality, than it will be to eliminate prejudice and selfishness.

Strive to wipe from your mind those thoughts that are unworthy of a child of God, and to weed out activities that may not be evil in themselves, but which so clutter up your days that you do not find time for things of higher value.

As you study this Lesson on FORGIVENESS it is wise to remember that whenever you make an advance in spiritual maturity, your conscience becomes increasingly sensitive. Your standard of what is right and honorable is raised. Constant fellowship with God in prayer makes you less willing to compromise with evil.

The business man will not juggle the figures on his tax returns if he feels God's hand upon his shoulder while he is filling out his reports. The doctor will not accept exorbitant fees for treating illnesses that require only a simple prescription. Parents will not expect high standards of honesty for their children while they themselves twist the truth to suit their own convenience.

We do wrong not only when we commit some misdemeanor, but when we waste our time on trivials or fail to undertake duties that are worthwhile. As students

of Mayanry, we know we err whenever we do anything that impairs our efficiency, or that hinders another from living nobly.

True prayer throws a searchlight upon all we say and do. We see both work and pleasure for what they really are, and we want to be rid of all that is useless. Never again would we become involved in pursuits that could leave a stain upon our lives. Moments spent in prayer help us to separate the high from the low, - the best from what is second rate.

Through the gateway of prayer we can see the high road we wish to be following. We can be saved from confusion, discontent, and regrets. We can recognize the way to become engaged in those activities that will enable us to find true satisfactions. We can see how to avoid every practice that tends to drag us into the mud. It is necessary for every one of us to have his conscience sensitized daily by contact with the Eternal. At the same time, we need to be relieved of the torture that comes with remorse. Only forgiveness can save us from the pangs of guilt that would inject poison into our systems, and which would foster illness of the body, mind, and soul.

It is not hard for us to detect the sins of others. But no person is able to live magnificently until he can look objectively at his own conduct, frankly admit his faults, and humbly ask for forgiveness. An awareness of our errors certainly brings pain. When we see the good, and choose what is inferior, it can cause us anguish. Remorse should lead to the desire for God's forgiveness. When FORGIVENESS is sought, and accepted, a new life opens before us.



LEARN THE VALUE OF PENITENCE

PENITENCE can set the stage for miraculous healing when the afflicted person releases those thoughts which have been irritating his wounds and separating him from God. In many instances, it is when one feels pangs of remorse that he is most willing to throw himself upon the mercy of God. Then, through the path of prayer, he can find his way back to the good life. He can discover the exultation and the peace that come to all those who, realizing their own inadequacy, are willing to trust God completely.

Several years ago a desperate alcoholic sought refuge in a sanatorium. He felt he was worthless. His family and friends thought he could not be saved. His physicians considered his case to be hopeless. The man had bragged that he was an agnostic, but reaching the point where he despised himself and saw no doctor or friend who promised help, he frantically prayed to God. The man's penitence, coupled with absolute sincerity, opened the sluice gates and allowed God's mercy and power to fill his mind and heart. He no longer craved alcohol. The freedom and joy which then transformed his life compelled him to share the Truth he discovered. It was this man who founded Alcoholics Anonymous.

Whether your need is for deliverance from the grip of some destructive habit, or from fears and misgivings that sap your energy, or from materialism and

self-centeredness, today turn to God in penitence. The Father is waiting to bathe your soul in His love. This can restore your spiritual health, as washing a wound with antiseptic solution provides the cleansing action that fosters healing.

Cast aside your pride. Ask God to forgive you for the bungling and stumbling way you have taken. Perhaps you have been over ambitious and in your eagerness to get ahead you have crushed others. Perhaps you have preferred ease and comfort to rendering assistance to those less fortunate than yourself. Perhaps you have indulged in moods of envy, anger, or melancholy.

Whatever errors you have made, do not now double the damage they can do by burning up your energy through ceaseless self-condemnation. Remember that God is continually seeking entrance into your life. Open the door of your mind and heart to Him. In utter humility, surrender your marred life to the One who can restore it and make it whole.



HOW TO ASK FOR FORGIVENESS

BEFORE we ask for God's forgiveness, we must be willing to forgive those who have offended or injured us. Listen to the promise and the warning:

"For if ye forgive men their trespasses, your Heavenly Father will also forgive you; but if ye forgive not men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses." -- Matthew 6:14, 15.

Albert Cliffe, an eminently successful clinical psychologist, reported that a badly crippled man stumbled into his office one day, thrusting himself forward with the aid of a crutch and a cane. After talking with him for some time, Dr. Cliffe discovered that the man was deeply resentful of a brother who had cheated him out of a large sum of money. It seemed evident that the man's illness was related to his bitterness, so Dr. Cliffe, then and there, had the man write a letter to his brother, saying that he forgave him. After a lengthy conversation, in which the psychologist informed the invalid of the effects of anger upon the physical body, the two knelt and prayed together. The man asked God to forgive him for harboring resentment. Then he stood erect, declaring that he had no more pain. He walked off without the crutch or cane!

Spiritual healing that grows out of the realization that we both forgive and are forgiven is not always as instantaneous as that. While we could record many notable instances of spontaneous recoveries which followed the sincere prayer: "Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us", there are far more healings that take place slowly, requiring weeks, or months, or even years of spiritual growth.

Restoration does not depend upon securing God's assistance, but upon the humble but eager spirit of the seeker. It is a mistake to assume that God is unwilling to forgive us if we are holding a grudge. On the contrary, God is always

eager to forgive, but He cannot grant us His peace when our hearts are filled with bitterness.

A man had been telling his Bible teacher about a member of the church who cheated him. He remarked, "I'm going to get even with that fellow even if it takes me a lifetime!" The teacher took his hand and said, "Jim - I hope you never do anything that is wrong, so you will need to ask for God's forgiveness. Remember that in order to receive forgiveness, you must be willing to forgive. This is a law of the universe, as unchangeable as the law of gravitation."

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1. You cannot really pray the Lord's Prayer unless you first wipe all resentment from your heart. When you approach God in prayer, search your thoughts to see whether you are holding any grudges. Resolve, if necessary, to change your attitude. While you are striving to do this, bear in mind the fact that any trace of hate destroys both your peace and your efficiency. It is like acid eating into your soul, causing a festering wound. The most miserable people are not the poor, or those who suffer physical pain, but those whose minds are tortured by resentment. Therefore, if you would know peace and joy, forgive - generously forgive those who have trespassed on your rights, or who have injured you in any way. Do not weigh their worth. Do not mete out justice. Forgive. You will rediscover joy. Forgive. You will experience a surge of vitality when your inner resources are not drained off by the desire to seek revenge.
2. Remember God's generous forgiveness of you. He does not weigh your merits, but is merciful. If your heavenly Father is willing to erase all record of your transgressions, and to give you a clean page - not once but over and over again - surely you can forgive the one who, through blindness, stupidity, or selfishness, has trespassed upon your rights. Recall God's infinite grace and it will help you to gain a forgiving spirit.
3. Realize that God's forgiveness is not offered as an easy escape from the consequences of our failures. While God does grant release to all who in true humility ask for forgiveness, we are expected to make a new start and to shake off the practices that have been warping our lives; we must be willing to be guided by God. This should not make us conscious of burdensome restrictions. Rather, it raises the level of our desires until Divine Love shapes our thinking and directs the ways in which we spend our time and our money.

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We may berate ourselves and be miserable because: "I lost my temper", or "I was unfair to my competitor", or "I gossiped about my neighbor". These are but unfortunate manifestations of poverty of soul. When we are willing to completely dedicate our lives, to allow all we have and all we are to be used by God for the fulfillment of His purposes upon the earth, we are lifted above envy, or pride, or sensitiveness. We are no longer tempted to be snobbish, or coldly indifferent, or selfish. Slightings do not wound us deeply and they are soon forgotten. Lonesomeness makes us outgoing, instead of withdrawn. Suffering makes us eager to heal the wounds of all those who are in pain.

When you approach God in prayer and prepare to ask Him to forgive you for your failures, be sure that while naming the specific offenses and shortcomings that are yours, you also are sorry that your religion has been so half-hearted, that you have been reluctant to commit your total life to God. Draw near to Him in utter humility and complete surrender as you ask Him to forgive your sins - whether they are sins of the flesh, or petty thoughts and narrow attitudes that restrict your spiritual growth.

How small we are in comparison with the noble men and women God intends us to be! Daily we fail to measure up to our highest potential! For our smallness and our smugness we should ask God's forgiveness. And even as we make our petitions we should be willing to accept His mercy, His grace, and His power to set us climbing once more.

Through new resolutions we gain the will to achieve new heights of living. Through greater humility - through becoming more keenly aware of our own weakness, but of God's never-failing support - we become new men and women. Our desires are elevated. Our thoughts are more constructive. Our power is undergirded by a strength beyond our own. We find we can be steady, where formerly we would have faltered. Old temptations disappear. Fear vanishes. We attempt "the impossible" and find we are able to accomplish whatever we know the Father wants us to do.



ACCEPT GOD'S PARDON

YOU should never go to bed at night holding a grudge against someone who has brought you injury - real or fancied. This does more than cause sleeplessness. It is injurious to your health. Self-condemnation is as great an error. It fosters both physical and mental sickness and depletes strength.

Do not chastise yourself for mistakes you have made through ignorance. Do not bemoan the fact that there is much good that is desperately needed, but which you cannot do because of limitations of strength or of finances. God does not expect of you more than you are able to accomplish. He does not chide anyone for failures that are beyond his control.

But when your life has been marred by the sin of selfishness, jealousy, anger, or prejudice, what then? There is only one way to regain peace of mind. That is to admit your error and throw yourself upon the mercy of God. Otherwise you become tense and nervous. You burn up energy in remorse when you need all your physical and mental stamina to cope with the situations you face.

How fortunate we are to have the assurance that we need not bargain for God's forgiveness! Recall the promise that when we have fallen into evil ways our Father is waiting with outstretched arms, hoping the erring one will "come to himself" and return home. Read again the parable of the Prodigal Son.

Notice that at the time the Prodigal expressed a desire to leave home, he was not forced to remain, but given his freedom. And when the young man went from bad to worse, the Father neither compelled him to return to an honorable way of life, nor looked upon the boy as an outcaste. The Father patiently waited, hoping, expecting that eventually the son would be sorry for his wrongdoing and want to come home. And when the young man did turn about and seek forgiveness, he found the Father waiting with open arms.

The Prodigal had to turn about of his own free will. He had to respond to his nobler impulses. Only then did he see that his Father was waiting to forgive him.

This we must do, whether we have wandered off into the barren wilderness of envy, jealousy, and anger, or into the whirlpool of materialism, covetousness, and anxiety, or into any evil that keeps us from attaining the noble life the Father planned for us. We must turn about and desire what is honorable and lovely.

Then we must be willing to be restored to a place in God's household. There is no use saying, "I'm not good enough", or "I don't deserve it". Of course you don't. None of us do. But, fortunately, God's love is extended to those who are unworthy. God cares for each one of us so much that even when we feel we have no right to ask for His forgiveness and love, He still offers it to us!

Only those who are blind and stupid will refuse God's generous offer. It brings liberation from mental torture. It sets us on our feet again. It lifts the cloud that has been hanging over us.

Accept God's pardon and any remorse you have known will cease to nag you day and night. Become enveloped in God's forgiving love and you will feel like singing. You will know peace of mind and will receive the courage and strength to meet the challenge of each new day.



TO SUMMARIZE:

Repeating the Lord's Prayer we may say: "Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors." If your brother has borrowed a hundred dollars from you and he is unable to pay it, he does not want to come to your home to dinner. He finds ways to avoid meeting you or your wife. A great gulf has been created between you. But, if you - aware of his inability to pay the debt - give your brother the hundred dollars as a gift - there is hope that the rift between you can be repaired. No full restoration of family feeling can be achieved, however, unless your brother is willing to accept what you offer. Forgiveness must involve both of the parties who are concerned.

When we say the Lord's Prayer, instead of using the word "debts", we may say: "Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us." While the word "trespasser" might refer to someone who came upon your land without permission, it might as well suggest someone who infringed upon your time, or one

whose gossip smeared your good reputation. Intrusion upon your peace of mind, as well as upon your property, naturally prompts you to build a wall to shut the offender out of your life.

Before the gulf between alienated people can be restored, one must offer forgiveness. When a misunderstanding has arisen between husband and wife, or between friends, the crucial moment is when one says, "I am sorry." This does not necessarily mean that he counts the injury of no consequence. It does affirm that he wishes to restore the broken relationship. Naturally, the other person still has the power to reject the offer of reconciliation if he cares more about his pride than he does about his marriage or his friendship, so forgiveness may never be achieved.

We should be willing to sacrifice our vanity in order to rebuild severed human relationships. This step is necessary before we are in a position to accept God's forgiveness of our own errors and shortcomings. Do not forget, however, that when a human being makes an overture of reconciliation and is rebuffed he may be further offended. But God's offer of forgiveness is ceaseless. The only barriers that exist between us and the Father are those which we erect.

You need not allow guilt to cause you to become estranged from God. Kneel in penitence and ask for forgiveness. Then gladly accept His mercy and your load will be lifted. You will feel like a new person when the remorse which tortured you has been wiped away.



AFFIRMATION

I will not harbor resentment, but will freely forgive anyone who has injured me, or infringed upon my rights.

Trusting in God's limitless love, I will humbly ask Him to forgive my errors and shortcomings. In faith, I will accept God's forgiveness and be restored to His fellowship.



Blessings,

Your Instructor.